

T H E
L O U N G E R.

[N^o LXIX.]

Saturday, May 27. 1786.

(Continuation of the Remarks on the Character of Falstaff.)

TO a man of pleasure of such a constitution as Falstaff, temper and good humour were necessarily consequent. We find him therefore but once I think angry, and then not provoked beyond measure. He conducts himself with equal moderation towards others; his wit lightens, but does not burn; and he is not more inoffensive when the joker, than offended when joked upon: “I am not only witty myself, but the cause that ‘wit is in other men.’” In the evenness of his humour he bears himself thus, (to use his own expression), and takes in the points of all assailants without being hurt. The language of contempt, of rebuke, or of conviction, neither puts him out of liking with himself or with others. None of his passions rise beyond this controul of reason, of self-interest, or of indulgence.

Queen Elisabeth, with a curiosity natural to a woman, desired Shakespeare to exhibit Falstaff as a lover. He obeyed her, and wrote the *Merry Wives of Windsor*; but Falstaff’s love is only factor for his interest, and he wishes to make his mistresses “his Exchequer, his East and West Indies, to both of which he will trade.”

Though I will not go so far as a paradoxical critic has done, and ascribe valour to Falstaff; yet if his cowardice is fairly examined, it will be found to be not so much a weakness as a principle. In his very cowardice there is much of the sagacity I have remarked in him; he has the sense of danger, but not the discomposure of fear. His presence of mind saves him from the sword of Douglas where the danger was real; but he shews no sort of dread of the sheriff’s visit, when he knew the Prince’s company would probably bear him out: when Bardolph runs in frightened, and tells that the sheriff, with a most monstrous watch, is at the door, “Out, you rogue! (answers he) play out the play; “I have much to say in behalf of that Falstaff.” Falstaff’s

cowardice is only proportionate to the danger; and so would every wise man's be, did not other feelings make him valiant.

Such feelings, it is the very characteristic of Falstaff to want. The dread of disgrace, the sense of honour, and the love of fame, he neither feels, nor pretends to feel :

“ *Like the fat weed
That roots itself at ease on Lethe's wharf,*”

he is contented to repose on that earthy corner of sensual indulgence in which his fate has placed him, and enjoys the pleasures of the moment, without once regarding those finer objects of delight which the children of fancy and of feeling so warmly pursue.

The greatest refinement of morals, as well as of mind, is produced by the culture and exercise of the imagination, which derives, or is taught to derive, its objects of pursuit, and its motives of action, not from the senses merely, but from future considerations which fancy anticipates and realizes. Of this, either as the prompter, or the restraint of conduct, Falstaff is utterly devoid; yet his imagination is wonderfully quick and creative in the pictures of humour and the associations of wit. But the “ pregnancy of his wit,” according to his own phrase, “ is made ‘ a tapster;’ ” and his fancy, how vivid soever, still subjects itself to the grossness of those sensual conceptions which are familiar to his mind. We are astonished at that art by which Shakespeare leads the powers of genius, imagination, and wisdom, in captivity to this son of earth; ’tis as if transported into the enchanted island in the *Tempest*, we saw the rebellion of *Caliban* successful, and the airy spirits of *Prospero* ministering to the brutality of his slave.

Hence perhaps may be derived great part of that infinite amusement which succeeding audiences have always found from the representation of Falstaff. We have not only the enjoyment of those combinations, and of that contrast to which philosophers have ascribed the pleasure we derive from wit in general, but we have that singular combination and contrast which the gross, the sensual, and the brutish mind of Falstaff exhibits, when joined and compared with that admirable power of invention, of wit, and of humour, which his conversation perpetually displays.

In the immortal work of *Cervantes* we find a character with a remarkable mixture of wisdom and absurdity, which in one page excites our highest ridicule, and in the next is entitled to our highest respect. *Don Quixote*, like Falstaff, is endowed with ex-

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cellent discernment, sagacity, and genius; but his good sense holds sief of his diseased imagination, of his over-ruling madness for the achievements of knight-errantry, for heroic valour and heroic love. The ridicule in the character of Don Quixote consists in raising low and vulgar incidents, through the medium of his disordered fancy, to a rank of importance, dignity, and solemnity, to which in their nature they are the most opposite that can be imagined. With Falstaff it is nearly the reverse; the ridicule is produced by subjecting wisdom, honour, and other the most grave and dignified principles, to the controul of grossness, buffoonery, and folly. 'Tis like the pastime of a family-masquerade, where laughter is equally excited by dressing clowns as gentlemen, or gentlemen as clowns. In Falstaff, the heroic attributes of our nature are made to wear the garb of meanness and absurdity. In Don Quixote, the common and the servile are clothed in the dresses of the dignified and the majestic; while to heighten the ridicule, *Sancho*, in the half deceived simplicity, and half discerning shrewdness of his character, is every now and then employed to pull off the mask.

If you would not think me whimsical in the parallel, continued my friend, I should say that Shakespeare has drawn, in one of his immediately subsequent plays, a tragic character very much resembling the comic one of Falstaff, I mean that of *Richard III*. Both are men of the world, both possess that sagacity and understanding which is fitted for its purposes, both despise those refined feelings, those motives of delicacy, those restraints of virtue, which might obstruct the course they have marked out for themselves. The hypocrisy of both costs them nothing, and they never feel that detection of it to themselves which rankles in the conscience of less determined hypocrites. Both use the weaknesses of others, as skilful players at a game do the ignorance of their opponents; they enjoy the advantage not only without self-reproach, but with the pride of superiority. Richard indeed aspires to the Crown of England, because Richard is wicked and ambitious: Falstaff is contented with a thousand pounds of Justice Shallow's, because he is only luxurious and dissipated. Richard courts Lady Anne and the Princess Elisabeth for his purposes: Falstaff makes love to Mrs Ford and Mrs Page for his. Richard is witty like Falstaff, and talks of his own figure with the same sarcastic indifference. Indeed, so much does Richard, in the higher walk of villainy, resemble Falstaff in the lower region of roguery and dissipation, that it were not difficult to shew, in the dialogue of the two characters, however dissimilar

diffimilar in situation, many passages and expressions in a style of remarkable resemblance.

Of feeling, and even of passion, both characters are very little susceptible; as Falstaff is the knave and the sensualist, so Richard is the villain of principle. Shakespeare has drawn one of passion in the person of *Macbeth*. Macbeth produces horror, fear, and sometimes pity; Richard, detestation and abhorrence only. The first he has led amidst the gloom of sublimity, has shewn agitated by various and wavering emotions. He is sometimes more sanguinary than Richard, because he is not insensible of the weakness or the passion of revenge; whereas the cruelty of Richard is only proportionate to the object of his ambition, as the cowardice of Falstaff is proportionate to the object of his fear: but the bloody and revengful Macbeth is yet susceptible of compassion, and subject to remorse. In contemplating Macbeth, we often regret the perversion of his nature; and even when the justice of Heaven overtakes him, we almost forget our hatred at his enormities, in our pity for his misfortunes. Richard, Shakespeare has placed amidst the tangled paths of party and ambition, has represented cunning and fierce from his birth, untouched by the sense of humanity, hardly subject to remorse, and never to contrition; and his fall produces that unmixed and perfect satisfaction which we feel at the death of some savage beast that had defoliated the country from instinctive fierceness and natural malignity.

The weird-sisters, the gigantic deities of northern mythology, are fit agents to form Macbeth. Richard is the production of those worldly and creeping demons, who slide upon the earth their instruments of mischief to embroil and plague mankind. Falstaff is the work of *Circe*, and her swinish associates, who, in some favoured hour of revelry and riot, moulded this compound of gross debauchery, acute discernment, admirable invention, and nimble wit, and sent him for a confort to England's madcap Prince; to stamp currency on idleness and vice, and to wave the flag of folly and dissipation, over the seats of gravity, of wisdom, and of virtue.

• E D I N B U R G H:

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